

## Day of Hope for a Half Century of Despair

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*Rockefeller Center rally announces Day of Hope in New York City*

Text: Ezekiel 37: 1-14 "Can these dry bones live, O son of man?" According to the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel received from God the vision of a dry and desolate valley whose hot sands were strewn with the bleached bones of fallen heroes. Many people are reminded of such a hopeless sight as they consider our contemporary world. Look at our government. O son of man, can these bones live?

Look at our cities -- urban sprawl, inner city slums, unsafe streets, dope addiction, white-collar crime, racial unrest. Look at our landscape with its polluted rivers and lakes, its poisoned fish, its smog-filled skies, its endangered wildlife. O mortal man, can these bones live?

Yes, even consider our churches. O son of man, is there any hope for new life at all?

God speaks, here and now. In an age remarkably like that of Ezekiel, a time so similar to our own, St. Paul wrote a magnificent sentence to a little group with a new religion. To the young church at Philippi, the apostle declared, "... you are like stars in a dark world offering to men the message of life." (2: 15-16, Goodspeed translation).

A brilliant French lawyer and devout Protestant, Jacques Ellul has entitled his latest book *Hope in an Age of Abandonment*. That's the sort of gospel, literally good news, we should be proclaiming. But how? Wouldn't we be whistling in the dark as we walk through a graveyard? Can we be honest with ourselves and preach a gospel about this time as a Day of Hope? We can only if we have a sense of the real presence of the Divine, above us, around us, and deep within.

Far too often the church has concentrated on the past. The Eastern Orthodox say, see how God was with us at the ecumenical councils of Nicea, Chalcedon, Constantinople names with the musty smell of ancient history about them.

Roman Catholics tell us, remember the Middle Ages, the gothic cathedrals, the Christian philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, the song of Saint Francis about Brother Sun, Sister Moon. The Lutherans maintain, look at Martin Luther (born 1483, died 1546); recall the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. And we Congregationalists for our part chime in, don't forget the Mayflower and the Pilgrims, 1620 and all that.

Once upon a time long ago Ralph Waldo Emerson was invited to give a lecture at the Divinity School of Harvard College. It was quite fitting to ask him. Emerson was the son of the revered minister of the First Congregational Church of Boston. For a time, he himself had been the pastor at Second Church and preached from the pulpit of Cotton Mather.

But what did Emerson say? In one sentence the famous Transcendentalist declared, Christians say "God *spoke*"; they should say, God *speaks* here and now.

Harvard, liberal, sophisticated, powerful, took 20 years (no, 30), it is reported, to recover from the shock of learning that God was still alive, still working, still speaking, still revealing Himself.



*Jeannine Hancock plays for One World Crusade rally in Miami, FL*

### **The God-game**

According to the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth accused his enemies -the Temple priests, the religious officials, the theologians, the learned scribes of the Holy Scripture-of being hypocrites, i.e., mere actors involved in religious make believe. You are just playing the God-game, he complained. The preoccupation churches display for the God of the dead past, the Divine yesterday, is one of the most common ways we put on a mask and imitate being pious.

To cite a specific example, a certain American denomination boasts of its superior social status. It has more corporation executives, more grande dames, more beautiful people percentage-wise than any of its competitors. That isn't a lie. The record proves it.

But do you know what that respectable, responsible church is doing at this very moment? Right now, bishops and laymen in holy convocation are debating - Should we update our Prayer book of 1549? And should we ordain women to the Christian ministry?

Imagine, if you will, a lady of fashion whose name appears regularly in the society page of the metropolitan daily. At her penthouse apartment in the best neighborhood, she flicks off the latest episode of "Secret Storm" on her color TV, takes a final sip of her fourth afternoon martini and writes this letter to the editor of her favorite Anglo-Catholic magazine, *The Living Church*: "Dear editor... We must not allow priestesses at our altars. Such a thought sickens me. Where are we -- back in pagan Rome!" (She pours another drink).

Imagine another real life scene. A chauffeur is driving a limousine from Wall Street to the country estate of J. J. Uppington III. In the back seat the chairman of the board of Consolidated Plastics, Inc., is talking to his secretary on the car telephone: "Miss Jones, send a telegram to Bishop A. J. Thompson Seth-Smyth. Tell him: 'Dear Artie, Vote against Prayer book revision. As I tell the kids, I'm all for the old time religion. What was good enough for Granny is OK for me. Hope you can make it for golf at the country club Tuesday next.'"

Can you believe it? That's top-drawer Christianity, 1973 model. A comfortable religion and an antique religion show-Christianity in crisis today. Well, please, please, let's be generous. It is easy to see the mote, the speck of sawdust, in their eye. Pray, please pray, we do not have a beam, a whole log, sticking into our own eye these days.

### **A God of heart**

We can have a gospel of hope only if we can be sure of the God who is right here, right now. Yesterday is all over, finis. There's no way to rewrite the script. We have *now* alone, *only* now, now or nothing.

If man is made in the image of God, if history is the record of how God brings us back into a loving relationship of give and take with Him, then we must focus our attention on the God who is right here: the Divinity in whom you and I, America and NATO, Senator Sam Ervin and comedian Flip Wilson live and move and have our being.

We can have a Day of Hope precisely to the extent we believe in a God of heart. This may represent a very novel idea even in Christian circles. Some theologians insist that God is outside us, above us, far

from us, unlike us. God is Wholly Other, Karl Barth of Basel, Switzerland used to insist.

Many Christians argue in favor of a vast, virtually unbridgeable chasm between the Divine and the human, God and the world, faith and reason, the Invisible and the visible. When you want to define and describe God, all you can say is "Not this, not that."

One side of Judaism would agree. That's why the Holy of Holies, the innermost shrine, in the second Temple at Jerusalem was an empty room. No artist can paint the Divine portrait. No sculptor can carve the Divine Likeness. No tangible visible symbol can capture the Divine transcendence.

Christianity, however, looks at God from another angle. Jesus taught Immanuel, God-with- us. He was the prophet of Divine-human intimacy. Ever since, the church has used human personality as the clue to the mystery of Divine Being.

Do you want to know God? Do you want to see Him? Do you long to meet Him? Look at a man-Jesus, Paul, Luther, your father or friend; gaze into his eyes; watch him smile; study his face, put your hand into his hand... If you want to discover God, view man, individual man, ordinary or extraordinary flesh and blood man.

For Christians, man is a creature of emotion, feelings, sentiment, sympathy, compassion, agape-love. Similarly, God is a God of heart. As the Swiss theologian of Divine otherness confessed in one of his last books, we must talk about the utter "humanity of God."

### **Hope in Russia**

Consider the gospel of the Day of Hope from the standard of recent history. Can one make sense out of our phase of human existence? You and I have been living during the most gigantic experiment in social engineering the world has ever witnessed. In Russia since 1917 and in China since 1948, the powers that be have been quite consciously trying to create a new sort of human animal. How? How can one produce a new species of man, mass man who will obey, elite man to run everything?

Destroy the artificial social distinctions which separate one man from his fellow, commanded the Bolsheviks of 1917. Kill the Czar, wipe out the aristocracy, ruin the landlords, brainwash the university professors. That was Lenin's program.

But it was not enough. Industrialize, the people cried. Turn all of Russia from the Polish frontier to Siberia into a huge Pittsburgh. So Joseph Stalin concentrated all the energies of the totalitarian state on the creation of heavy industry in the Soviet Union. A continent of farmers would be recast into a vast assembly line of workers. Remember me for a thousand years as the Russian man of steel, boasted Stalin.

Still the people grumbled. Give us socialism with a human face, they pleaded. Soviet society is too mechanical, too regimented, too repressive, they complained.

Show us a world that cares. Do you know where that leads? Directly to religion. Svetlana Stalin, daughter of the dictator, fled the Soviet Union and announced to the press she had turned to God. What can one think of Russia since World War I? Across the bloody pages of Soviet history slithers a deadly snake, a cosmic serpent, we may say with considerable justification.

Is that all? No, far from it. Learn about the USSR from inside, with the heart. Read its history by Professor Vernadsky, the treasury of Russian spirituality by Professor Fedotov, the Christian theology of the exiled priest Bulgakov, the tragic biography of Nicholas and Alexandra, the autobiography of Kerensky, the analysis of modern society by Sorokin, even the best poetry of Yevtushenko.

A good look at Russia in our time will force you to your knees in prayer. When you really see the Soviet Union as it is and has been, to your lips will come a prayer -- a *confession* of the monstrous sins of modern man, *petition* for millions of victims of senseless dictatorship, *gratitude* for the heroism of countless martyrs for God and human dignity, yes, and renewed *dedication* to a Divine kingdom of justice, freedom and faith.

### **Hope from the East**

But how can we get hope in a half century of despair? Recall a sentence from the church covenant of the Pilgrim Fathers: "We covenant one with another and with God... in His truth, made known *or to be made known to us.*" As Congregationalists we have never believed in a closed canon of Holy Scripture or a God who stopped speaking in some day long since past. As our great preachers said 50 or 75 years ago, we believe in progressive revelation, continuing revelation, contemporary revelation, the today faith of the Now God.

There seems to be considerable evidence from many quarters that our present Christianity can be greatly enriched if we look to the spiritual masters of the East. Arnold Toynbee argues our Western church can benefit from a rendezvous with Buddhism. The Beatles toured India in search of enlightenment and peace from a Hindu guru. Alan Watts, an Episcopal chaplain, has written book after book praising the spiritual insight to be derived from Japanese Zen, Square Zen, Beat Zen even.

Nor should we overlook Korea, a land which amazed Billy Graham by the depth of its religious devotion. Korea gave the American evangelist his biggest rally in a long and distinguished career, you may recall. If an American could go to Korea to preach, a Korean has returned the favor by preaching here. In that spirit, let me commend to your attention the teachings of the Korean master, Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Perhaps you may wonder why Sun Myung Moon is worth bothering about. After all, there's a virtual supermarket stocked with new religions and cut-rate prophets these days.

Sun Myung Moon comes from Korea, the land bridge between China and Japan, much as ancient Palestine was the ordinary link between civilized Egypt and the cultures of the Middle East in Biblical times. That may be significant. Rev. Moon first heard the call of God when he was only 16 years old, a mere adolescent. That may be important because we have certainly learned from young people what it means to be idealistic and open to the ever-so-slight palpitations of the soul. Sun Myung Moon's dedication to the will of God took place on Easter Sunday as he knelt in holy prayer.

But his faith was tested by the anti-Christian pogroms of the Japanese military imperialists who ruled Korea until the end of World War II. Possibly his iron will goes back to that time. His Christian faith was even more severely tested when Red hordes overran North Korea and the Stalinist dictator Kim II-Sung sentenced him to virtual death in a Communist prison camp.

It at too may explain a lot. These days anyone who has seen Red tyranny first hand has something to teach us about what it means for Christians to carry a cross. He who has eyes, let him see. He who has ears, let him hear.

### **Divine joy and mission**

Some of my Christian friends are occasionally critical of Rev. Moon. Please take it from someone who knows a little about Christianity, a bit about the Bible, a dedicated Congregationalist with 25 years preaching experience and some awareness of the crisis in Christianity today, the youthful followers of Sun Myung Moon can be favorably compared with the original disciples of Saint Francis, young people with a religion of Divine joy, or the early members of the Company of Jesus founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola, youth filled with a Divine sense of mission, zeal and self-sacrifice. If those who followed Saint Francis banished the gloom of the Dark Ages with their songs and those who obeyed the Rule of Ignatius restored the health of a worldly church, the disciples of Sun Myung Moon will deserve the gratitude of the whole body of Christ, if they can show us God's hope for man, God's hope for America, and a worthy future for Christianity.

According to a French short story, after Pontius Pilate finished his onerous tour of duty as military governor of Judea and retired to his villa outside Rome, he was visited by an old friend. Soon the two elderly Romans started to reminisce about the past.

How did you like your work in Jerusalem, Pontius? Terrible. Dullest place in the world. Nothing worth mentioning. Absolutely no one interesting. When I wasn't disgusted, I was completely bored.

How would you and I have reacted if we had been around Palestine in 30 AD? Would we have been bored by the age which saw the ministry of Jesus? Would we have been discouraged or disillusioned or disgusted or dismayed by news that the kingdom was within reach? When someone came with a new understanding of God, a new interpretation of basic human problems, a new hope for the church in crisis, would we have welcomed him or spit on him? What response should one make to the good news of a Now God speaking in our time and to our age?

"Can these dry bones live, O Son of man?... Prophecy and say to them, thus says the Lord God: Behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people."

Ours can be a religion of hope if we believe in the Here God of heart with a fresh message for our time.